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DISCOURSE
ON
EDWARD EVERETT,
BY FREDERIC HENRY HEDGE.

1880

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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DISCOURSE

ON

EDWARD EVERETT,

DELIVERED IN THE

CHURCH OF THE FIRST PARISH, BROOKLINE,

ON THE TWENTY-SECOND JANUARY.

BY FREDERIC HENRY HEDGE.



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DISCOURSE.

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“Honor to whom honor.” — ROM. xiii. 7.

OUR Commonwealth mourns in these days the loss of its brightest ornament; the nation, of one of its ablest statesmen, its wisest counsellors, its truest and most devoted servants. The death of Mr. EVERETT, of which last Sunday brought us the tidings as we came to this place of our devotions, is felt to be a national calamity: it shares, for the moment, the national interest with the great events of the war.

The man who for half a century, with brief exceptional intervals, had been in the public service, belongs to the public; his life and character and name are public property; and, when he departs out of our sight, they remain a public interest and concern; a study for the Church as well as the world; inviting discussion from the pulpit, as well as the rostrum and the press.

It is not my purpose to present you with a sketch of this rich and illustrious life. I shall not attempt to enumerate the many and distinguished services of our fellow-citizen, nor will I undertake the analysis of his intellectual and moral character, but confine

myself to one or two points of special interest, or to such as seem to me to possess a moral significance.

The first thing which suggests itself, in our recollection of Mr. Everett, is the admirable genius of the man as displayed in public speech. In this particular, he has had no superior in this country, — perhaps no equal, considering the scope of his rhetorical vocation, the wide variety and great dissimilarity of the topics, interests, occasions, assemblies, platforms, which claimed his advocacy or exercised his powers. Others of our national orators may have excelled him in one or another particular, — some in popular harangue, some in forensic debate. Mr. Clay's impulsive vehemence would tell with more thrilling effect on the passions of a miscellaneous auditory; Mr. Webster's ponderous strength would strike a more amazing blow in the senate or the court. But not to speak of learning and high intellectual culture, in which he confessedly excelled not only these, but all American orators, neither Webster nor Clay possessed the breadth and versatility and mental resources of Mr. Everett. Neither they, nor any other speaker within my knowledge, could vie with him in easy ascent, in ready association of ideas, in prompt suggestion and fertile invention, in facility of transition, in exuberant fancy, in rich and graceful ornamentation, and that astonishing memory, that uniform command of his powers, which made him equal to every occa-

sion, sure to interest every assembly, and equally interesting from beginning to end of his discourse. His pinion never drooped, his hearers never wearied. Other orators might excel him in particular instances: but no speaker to whom I have ever listened, without trick or bait, addressing the reason only, speaking in a grave way on grave subjects, could so command and hold the attention of a crowded assembly for consecutive hours.

But those who have known the great orator only in his later efforts can hardly appreciate the fascination which he exercised on youthful hearers in his own youth. A measure of scholarly learning uncommon in this country at that time; a poetic fancy; extraordinary beauty of person; the rich tones of a wonderfully cadenced voice; graceful bearing; a dignity beyond his years; a certain fine and mysterious reserve, which curbed, without impairing, the fervor of his discourse, — all this gave to his appearance and performance an ideal something, which seemed to denote a superior being, distinguishing him from all other speakers, not only in degree, but in kind, — something which brought to mind the Greek divinities of classic renown. My recollection does not embrace the period of his ministry as a pulpit orator. But those who remember him in that capacity will tell you, that, young as he was, — a youth of twenty, — no preacher in this community was heard with

greater admiration and delight. I recall him only as a secular orator. My first experience of his marvelous power in that line was the famous oration delivered before the University at Cambridge, in the presence of Lafayette, then visiting this country of his early fame; a performance which made an era in the literary history of the college, as it did in the intellectual history of many who heard it. The address to the honored guest drew tears from the veteran's eyes. All present were profoundly stirred. The vast assembly was fused together in one emotion. I suppose there was never an oration, spoken on a similar occasion and to such an audience, which affected so powerfully the sensibilities of those who heard it.

This first great effort of his early manhood established Mr. Everett's fame as an orator, and occasioned his nomination and election to a seat in the National Congress.—the beginning of his political career. Then followed in constant succession, interrupted only by his four-years' residence abroad, an astonishing number of orations and allocutions, pronounced on all possible occasions, civic, academic, political, historical, festive, and funereal, many of which are printed, and fill large volumes. They are characterized by perspicuity of statement, skilful arrangement, graceful method, massiveness of composition, felicity of illustration, purity of thought, nobility of sentiment, simplicity of diction. They place their author among

the very first orators, not of this age and country only, but of all time.

The remarkable quality in Mr. Everett's genius, that which underlies and causes the eminent truthfulness of all his performances, is moderation. I call it a quality of his genius. It was equally conspicuous in his moral conduct: it was the quality of the man. Moderation, in ordinary men, is often a weakness. Many, who have it in perfection, have nothing else; they are all moderation: but, unfortunately, there is nothing to moderate, no precipitancy, no exuberant force, no enthusiasm, no hot passion, no rushing, eager enterprise. It is the moderation of a dull canal. One would welcome in such characters a little excitement, an occasional indiscretion, as a sign of life. But moderation in great men is a noble quality, and a part of their greatness, like the moderation of the earth's centrifugal motion by the countervailing centripetal. Indeed, there is no real, effective, commanding greatness without this quality, but only flashes and spurts,—wild sallies of a lawless force, which may dazzle for the moment, but spends itself without profit, leaves no permanent trace, and dies of its own fury. This precisely distinguishes genius from the lesser lights that counterfeit it, that it knows how to discipline and govern itself, to curb its exuberant fancy, to restrain its lawless outbreaks, to check and guide its forces to right and healthful issues.

Self-control, self-possession, it is, that distinguishes the masters in art and the masters in life from bunglers and visionaries and fanatics. The direction to the players, which the great poet puts into the mouth of his hero, — “in the very torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of their passion, to acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness,” — is applicable to all the uses of art and to all the business of life. The prevailing vice of American oratory — as, alas! of so many other American doings — is extravagance, exaggerated statement, hyperbolical imagery, overdone sentiment, counterfeit enthusiasm, superfluous verbiage, riotous invective, and all that straining after coarse effect commonly known as “sensation,” properly so called; inasmuch as it aims to astonish, overwhelm, and harrow, and in every way to create a momentary, strong sensation in vulgar minds, and because it awakens a sensation of profound disgust in thoughtful and disciplined hearers and readers. The public meeting, the deliberative assembly, the floor of Congress, the platform, the stump, in some cases the pulpit even, resound with this kind of rhetoric; the newspapers and popular magazines glisten and froth with it. Calm, rational discourse, in which the manner is subordinate to the matter, or rather in which the weight and value of the matter tones and tempers the manner; discourse which derives its beauty and force from within, and not from any trick

of garnish or veneer; discourse that aims simply to instruct by reason and facts, or to edify by the justice and nobility of its sentiment. — although not wanting in the ordinary course of professional efforts, is seldom heard from American lips that are wont to address large popular assemblies on secular themes. The lips of Mr. Everett uttered no other. His speech is wise and temperate and calm; or, rising with his theme, excited only when the matter and occasion justify more glowing terms and a higher strain. He never deals in superlatives, but seems unconsciously to have followed the prescription of a celebrated author, who says that “the most universal rule for the writer, as well as the artist, is, that his expression be always beneath the thing which he represents.” Not often does he condescend to rhetorical tricks to heighten the flavor and enhance the effect of his discourse: and never, never, does he indulge in railing and bitter invective, or seek a momentary, cheap triumph by heaping obloquy on his opponents. His speeches are free from extravagance, free from vague declamation, from tawdry ornament, from puling sentimentality; above all, free from virulence and bitterness. They are solid and clean; and in and through these qualities they will live when the works and the very names of a hundred contemporary popular speakers are forgotten.

The self-possession which distinguished him as

orator, and which formed so striking a trait of Mr. Everett's genius, was in his character as well as his speech: it was thoroughly inwrought in the man. An imperturbable dignity enveloped him like an atmosphere, accompanying all his ways. Even as a child, he is said to have been distinguished not less by the dignity of his manners than by his shining and precocious gifts. There was nothing loose, ungirt, or dishevelled, in his bearing. Mr. Carlyle, in a letter to a friend, describes him happily as a "compact man." Though given to humor, and apt to indulge in playful talk, and though capable of moral indignation like every earnest and right-minded man, he was never unduly excited in the way of anger or of mirth; never carried beyond himself. No vehement tones, no spasms, no boisterous demonstration. His habitual self-command extended to his very looks. His face was no book wherein one might read the workings of his mind. Such control, perhaps I should say, such immobility of feature, one shall rarely see in so sensitive a man. When not engaged in public discourse, his countenance seemed to lack animation, giving no response by light or shade, by flashing eye or quivering lip, by heightened or vanishing color, to the passing scene or the words that fell on his ear. No change of feature betrayed his thought, or revealed emotion, if any there were to reveal. Those slow-moving eyes,

with their burdened lids,— you watched them in vain in the public assembly for any expression of satisfaction or dissent. Did they see what passed? Did the soul behind them partake in what passed? They gave no sign.

It follows almost of course, from this predominant trait, that Mr. Everett was not a popular man. A reserve so impenetrable, dignity so severe, would necessarily isolate him, repelling familiarity. Whatever he may have been in the privacy of the family-circle, he was not one with whom a stranger slid into easy relations,— not one to whom a companion would pour himself forth, or who would pour himself forth to him. “His soul was like a star, and dwelt apart.” Though uniformly affable, and innocent of arrogance or pride, there seemed to be a near and impassable barrier to intimate communion. Friends, of such as honored and loved him, he had many: friends, in the sense of easy confidential fellowship, he had few. He was not popular; perhaps it was a weakness that he was not,— a too icy reserve, a too fastidious shrinking from nearer contact with his kind. But, on the other hand, it is the weaknesses of men, nay,— a certain amount of merit being given,— it is their imperfections, their very follies, that make them popular, rather than their virtues. It is these that place them on a level with their race, compensating thus the superior ability

which had seemed to divide them from the rest of mankind. Men love to feel that the great man has this at least in common with them. The public jester is popular; the jovial, careless liver is popular; the censor, whether by open reproof or the silent rebuke of an austere life, is not. Clay was popular, Sheridan was popular, Charles II. was popular, Mirabeau was popular; Milton, Burke, Aristides, Washington, were not. Mr. Everett shared none of those pursuits, was addicted to none of those habits or amusements, which bring men into closer fellowship and facilitate confidential communion. He was not a boon-companion, not a lover of games; he took no pleasure in the killing of birds or fishes; his habits were studious and recluse. He was not popular: by so much the more significant is the deep sensation caused by his death; so much the more valuable, as testimony to the real worth of the man, is the universal, spontaneous, heartfelt demonstration of respect to his memory. — a demonstration prompted by no superficial liking, but wrung from the grateful heart, and enforced by the deepest moral judgment of the people whom he served with the strength of his manhood and the last ripe fruits of his age, with his life and with his death, — a tribute such as is rarely accorded to any individual in any age; more unqualified and sincere, it seems to me, than any American has received

since Washington. "Call no man happy," said the wise Athenian, "until his death." The death is often the interpreter and key to the life. What a life must that have been of which such a death is the exponent! A rich and varied, eventful, laborious, honorable life! That brief compendium of the public history of its graduates, the Catalogue of Harvard College, appends to the name of Everett a longer, fuller tale of offices and honors than to any other, in a record which embraces more than two hundred years in its annals. All the honors which this country has in its gift, beside academic and literary honors bestowed abroad, have been conferred upon him,—all but that one which should be the highest, but from which, as we know, in our day, their very worth has excluded the worthiest men.

In his public career, as a statesman and politician, Mr. Everett has been singularly self-consistent; and though that, in itself, is *not* the jewel which the current proverb would make it, it becomes so when conscientious action is the stuff it adorns. Thoroughly and consistently patriotic I believe him to have been, as he interpreted the duty and demand of patriotism in the cases in which he was called to act. His interpretation might differ from yours and mine: but, such as it was, he acted upon it with unswerving fidelity. Above cabal and intrigue, he

preferred before private or merely party interest what he conceived to be public good. He sometimes erred, as it seemed to me then, as it seems to me now. He erred through excessive caution. He pursued that misjudged policy of concession to the insolent claims of the South, which has been the source of all our woe; when resolute resistance, if it could not avert secession, would have crushed it in the bud. His motive, I believe, was as pure in this, it was the same in this, as that which dictated his patriotic efforts in these latter years. It was love of the Union, which he believed might be saved by conciliation, not perceiving that no conciliation would avail which left to the North a relic of freedom.

He was not an antislavery man. I regret to have it to say that he was not; that he placed the letter of the Constitution above the idea and the purpose which lie at the basis of that Union, whose instrument the Constitution is,—above the natural rights of man; that, while his heart was penetrated with the purest spirit of humanity, the theory of humanity in its application to this subject was foreign to his mind. Yet it is my sincere belief, that, if his lot had been cast at the South, he would have been a kinder master, and more likely to have given his slaves their freedom, than some abolitionists whom I have known. Though not an antislavery man, and though pursuing what I conceive to have

been a mistaken policy towards the South, he was not so blind or so indifferent to the encroachments of the slave-power, nor so regardless of the rights of the North, as to yield without resistance the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. He entered his strong protest against that nefarious measure,—the ruthless violation of a solemn covenant between the two sections, designed to secure their mutual rights. This, too, I honor in him, that after the fatal rupture which divided the land, when the wish to approve himself personally in the eyes of the South could no longer be imputed to him as a motive, and while throwing himself with all his talent and all his influence on the side of the North, he did not, for the sake of popularity with the loyal States, pretend to be in theory more the enemy of slavery than he had been; he did not pretend to any sudden conversion; he did not pretend to have held or to hold any different theory on the subject; although, as a measure of policy, he favored emancipation.

His whole action is to be interpreted from the point of view of dutiful regard to the common weal,—of conscientious and devoted patriotism. In this he was thoroughly, beautifully, heroically self-consistent. It is my deliberate conviction that this country had never a more faithful and devoted lover, never a more patriotic citizen, as certainly it has had few abler. In the service of the Union, with a

view to maintain and confirm the sole bond which seemed to him still to bind in one consciousness the distracted nation, referring all sections and factions to a common centre of love, he undertook a laborious mission in the interest of the memory of Washington. Soliciting nothing, but using the simple income of his eloquence, traversing the country from east to west, from north to south, "in journeyings often," "in labors more abundant," "in weariness and painfulness," he collected a sum amounting nearly, I believe, to a hundred thousand dollars.— a fact unexampled in the history of oratory. At an age when, without the stimulus of necessity, most men shrink from incurring literary responsibilities involving rapid and stated production, he entered into an engagement to furnish weekly contributions for a year, to a popular journal, in aid of the same cause.— the purchase, for a national possession, of the Mount-Vernon estate.

It has been charged upon him as an inconsistency, or even as a recreant act, that he, who in 1860 was a candidate for the Vice-Presidency on a ticket which represented a different policy, should in 1864 allow himself to be an elector of the very man to whom he was then opposed. There was no recreancy and no inconsistency here. So long as there remained the shadow of a hope that the Union might be preserved by conciliatory measures, and an administra-

tion representing both parties, he was willing to sacrifice every thing but principle and conscience to that much-desired end. And it was to him a real sacrifice of personal feeling to allow himself to be used for that purpose in that way. But when, in the spring of 1861, the die was cast; when the fatal blow was struck; when Secession, not content with peaceable separation, made war upon the Union, — then at once, without a moment's hesitation, as quickly and as surely as the ball first aimed at Fort Sumter followed the flash of the gun that sent it, he made his election, with heart and soul and mind and hand, with counsel and exhortation, with voice and pen, to stand by the Union, by the dear old flag of his allegiance, by the country of his birth and his vows. And since standing by the country in a time of war was identified, in his logical and conscientious mind, with standing by the Government, by the Administration which represented the country, and on whom its burdens and responsibilities were laid, he became at once the fast friend of the Administration, determined by all means, with all his powers, to strengthen its hands, to plead its cause, and, so far as might be, to lighten its heavy load. With what ability and with what success he has done this, with what generous, untiring, self-sacrificing devotion, through all the years of this war, he has followed this high ministry,

and borne his share of the universal burden, is known to all the citizens of this land; and known to all is that beautiful episode in his labors, — his persevering efforts in behalf of the suffering Unionists of Tennessee, which resulted in the contribution of the sum of a hundred thousand dollars to that noble charity.

Thus did our civil hero, by the strong persuasion of his eloquent lips and the valor of his pen, fight the civil and social battle of the Union, with as much true heroism, I dare to say, and as much self-sacrificing devotion, as any chief on the army-roll who has led his serried ranks to victory in the field. If Webster was thought, by his official labors in the Senate of the United States, to merit the title, "Defender of the Constitution," with equal justice has Everett, by his unofficial, voluntary labors, merited the title, "Defender of the Union."

For no service which he rendered, official or unofficial, as servant of the State or as voluntary servant of the people, did he take any bribe. He never molested his constituents, nor received a dollar beyond the stated salary of his office. Far from receiving, it was his better and more blessed privilege to give. A hundred thousand dollars, the fruit of his labors with tongue and pen, he gave to promote the cause of Union through the nation's common interest in the memory of Washington; a hundred thousand

more he was chiefly instrumental in procuring as a contribution to the charities of the war.

His private life was as spotless as his public course was patriotic and sincere. No breath of reproach ever sullied his fair repute; and no duties, according to the testimony of those who know best, were more faithfully and thoughtfully discharged by him than those of husband, father, and friend. Many were the offices of honor and trust which he filled with the light of his beneficent genius. An ordained minister of the gospel at the age of twenty; professor in the neighboring university, and afterwards its president; a member, at different periods, of both houses of Congress; governor of this Commonwealth; ambassador at the court of St. James; secretary of state in the national cabinet; yet noblest and greatest of all, in these latter years, as a private citizen, — his way of life, as I survey it in the retrospect, comes to me as a zodiac of luminous progress, “shining brighter and brighter unto the perfect day.”

The closing scene of this life, its last public act, preceding by a few short days its disappearance to mortal sight, was what he himself would have wished it to be, what every friend must rejoice to remember, — an act of charity; a plea for the people of Savannah, returning to their allegiance, and asking aid for their destitute starving city.

And here I notice a striking and beautiful relation

of correspondence between the beginning and the end. Mr. Everett's first public act — I mean the first spontaneous act in which he appeared before the general public, outside of the duties of his profession — was his "Defence of Christianity;" a book which he published, at the age of twenty, in answer to an infidel attack. At the age of twenty, a plea for theoretical Christianity; and now, at the age of seventy, after an interval of half a century, a plea for practical Christianity, urging his fellow-citizens to heap coals of the fire of Christian love on the heads of their enemies. "Do you say that they were lately our enemies?" he pleads. "I am convinced that the majority, the great majority, were so but nominally. But what if they were our enemies. 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink;' especially when he has laid down his arms, and submits to your power."

Between the theoretical and the practical plea, a half-century of solid, useful, noble work, a half-century devoted to the public good, a half-century of magnificent talent employed like a faithful steward for worthy and beneficent ends. What better legacy than the influence of such a life can a man leave behind him when he goes hence? What better outfit than the spirit of such a life can a man take with him on his voyage to the undiscovered land?

When the proto-martyr of the Christian Church,

on the eve of his death, harangued the people in defence of the faith. "all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." Those who heard Mr. Everett on that last occasion affirm that his countenance wore an unusual lustre, free from those traces of suffering it so often exhibited in these last years. Was it the transfiguration of the earthly through the forereaching heavenly so close at hand?

Blessed be the Father of lights, who gave us this light on our path!—another guide to patient well-doing, and final victory.



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